

## MEANING AT YOUR WORK INCREASES HAPPINESS ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHO ARE UNHAPPY

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### ABSTRACT

*Employers worldwide are spending millions of dollars in finding the best reward & incentive systems to bring the extra motivation at workplaces with the belief that more money will mean more happiness and which in turn will mean better performance. In this report we examine if this is at all the case in Indian context. We also wanted to check if there is another way to bring this extra motivation and whether the same can be non-monetary in general or meaning in particular. For the sake of our experiment we picked up insurance advisors of a private insurance company in India and divided them into two groups. One group was given intensive meaning training and the other group was given sales training. The first group which went through the meaning training was given a diary to write how they felt after their efforts every day. Happiness of these advisors were checked at the beginning of the experiment and also at the end of four weeks. Performance at work place was also checked to see if the heightened awareness of the meaning of the firm and the products they were selling also helped them deliver more to the organization. We also checked if the increase meaning also correlated well with the way people looked at their job with pride and had a sense of happiness or not. Our research proves that indeed, meaning at work is the best tool available and not being used by organizations when it comes to motivate employees to give their best.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rewards, Incentives, Meaning, Insurance industry, Happiness, well-being, Money and Performance

Original Article

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### INTRODUCTION

We all want meaningful work in life. Victor Frankel described the innate quest for meaning is so strong for people that even in the direst situations they seek out their purpose in life (Man's search for meaning) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959). Researchers now are showing how important meaning is for people coming to workplaces compared to anything else, be it pays or rewards, opportunities for promotion or even working conditions (W. Borman et. Al, 2003). Research is also showing us that meaningful work can motivate people to perform at a higher level (Berrett – Koehler, 2003). Unfortunately there hasn't been lot of research in the area of where and how people find meaningfulness in their work (Bailey et. Al, 2016) and what role leaders play in the process of employees finding their meaning at work (Pratt et al, 2013).

When people are asked to choose between happiness and meaning, lot of us chose to be happy (Nilesen, 2016) then meaningful. But researchers are showing that happy life and meaningful life differ – and that the surest path to happiness lies in chasing not just happiness but also meaningful life (Emily, 2016). In one of the study by the behavioral scientists Schooler et al asked participants to listen to a piece of emotionally ambiguous music. The researchers asked some participants to try and feel as happy as possible while listening to the song while the

other group was asked to just listen to the song. The people who tried to feel happy ended up unhappier after the experiment than those who listened without trying to boost their mood. By contrast, the pursuit of meaning leads to a deeper and more lasting form of wellbeing.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The distinction between happiness and meaningfulness has a long history in philosophy, which for thousands of years has recognized two forms of wellbeing – hedonia, or the Greek word for what behavioral scientists often call happiness and Eudaimonia, or what they call meaningfulness. While happiness is defined by seeking pleasure and enjoyment at the same time meaningful life is connecting and contributing to something beyond self, which could be your family, your work, nature, society or even to the almighty.

But are these two terms mutually exclusive, or we can have a situation where people can have both meaning and happiness, better still can happiness be increased by increasing meaning of people? In one analysis of five data sets comprising nearly 3000 people, researchers found that 20% respondents reported being happy and leading meaningful lives – while another 20% were low on both. Among those remaining 33% were high on happiness and low on meaning and 26% were high on meaning and low on happiness. (Huta, 2014). In two studies over 400 Americans, who fell into last two category i.e high on happiness and low on meaning and high on meaning but low on happiness, found important difference around how they lead their life. Those in high happy low meaning quadrant avoid difficult situations and describe themselves as relatively self-oriented and those in high meaning and low happiness always spent time helping others, being with friends taking care of the children and thinking about the past, present and future. (Jennifer, 2015).

So if meaning is so important than how do you recognize that someone has got meaning in the truest sense. Researchers at University of Connecticut identified three features as purpose –the degree to which you feel directed and motivated by valued life goals; comprehension – the ability to understand and make sense of your life experiences and weave them into a coherent whole and mattering – the belief that your existence is significant and valued. (George, 2015). When people say their lives are meaningful they feel their lives have purpose, coherence and worth.

But meaning isn't something you either have or don't have. It's a mindset. People can choose to pursue meaning as well as happiness. In a recent study researchers found that people behave very differently depending on what they emphasize in life and that in turn affects their well-being. In one study, college students were asked to pursue either meaning or happiness over 10 days by doing at least one thing each day to increase meaning or happiness, respectively. Some of the most popular activities in the meaning group included forgiving a friend, studying and helping or cheering up another person. Those in happiness group listed activities like sleeping in, playing games and eating candy. Although the students in the happiness group experienced more positive feelings and fewer negative ones immediately after the study, three months later their mood boos had faded. The students focused on meaning, didn't feel happy right way after the experiment. In fact some of the meaningful activities caused pain to those pursuing it. Yet, three months later the picture was different. The students who had pursued meaning said they felt more enriched, inspired and part of something greater than themselves. They also reported fewer negative moods. Over the long term, it seemed, pursuing meaning was more deeply satisfying than chasing happiness (Huta & Ryan, 2015).

Viktor Frankl, the holocaust survivor and author of Man's search for meaning, would not have been surprised. To the European it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to be

happy. But the happiness can't be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to be happy.

## METHODS

### Objective of the Study

- To study the relationship between happiness & meaning
- To understand if happiness can be increased by increasing meaning through meaning enhancing exercises
- To ascertain the impact of increased meaning on different segment of happy people.

### HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

- A positive relationship will exist between happiness and meaning.
- There will be an increase in happiness if we work on increasing meaning of people through meaning enhancing interventions
- The increase in happiness to people whose initial meaning is least will be the highest in comparison to those who already are at a higher state

### SAMPLE

A total of 50 employees at a life insurance company were asked to fill out two questionnaires. One measure their meaningfulness in life (MLQ) developed by Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006) and Happiness was measured through (SHS) developed by Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. (1999). The sample was randomly selected which was conveniently available to the researcher. Once the responded took these tests we took the group through meaning enhancing exercises and the same questionnaires were administered to this sample to see if the meaning enhancing interventions helped them achieve higher level of happiness.

Pre Intervention – n = 50 (2 questionnaires filled by each participant)

Post Intervention – n = 50 (2 questionnaire filled by each participant)

### TOOLS

#### Meaningfulness in Life (MLQ)

This questionnaire was developed by Steger, M.F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M (2006) and was published in Journal of counseling Psychology, 53, 80-93. It has a 10 item questionnaire designed to measure two dimensions of meaning in life: (1) Presence of Meaning (how much respondents feel their lives have meaning), and (2) Search for Meaning (how much respondents strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives). Respondents answer each item on a 7 point Likert type scale ranging from 1(Absolutely True) to 7 (Absolutely Untrue).

#### Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)

This questionnaire was developed by Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. Social Indicators Research, 46, 137-155. The original publication is available at [www.springerlink.com](http://www.springerlink.com). The questionnaire has 4 questions and uses 7 point rating scale, where 1 signifies low score and 7 is high score.

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The descriptive statistics used to conduct the data analysis comprised of computing the means for all the raw scores and their standard deviations. For further computations, inferential statistics like correlation to find out the relationship between mindfulness and happiness was used and to compute the significant differences, student's t test was used.

### **Procedure**

The administration of the tests was done personally. The researcher went to the life insurance company and parked himself in the cafeteria. The forms were handed over to the employees after being asked for their consent to be a participant in this study and were explained the entire process of the experiment. After their consent, they were asked to fill out the forms as fast and as truthfully as they can. No time limit was given. A brief conversation before starting the questionnaire was held in order to make the employees comfortable. The informed consent regarding the confidentiality of the test was taken. They were assured that the results are for the academic purpose and individuality of the respondent wouldn't be disclosed at any point of time. Once they were comfortable then the questionnaire was handed over to them.

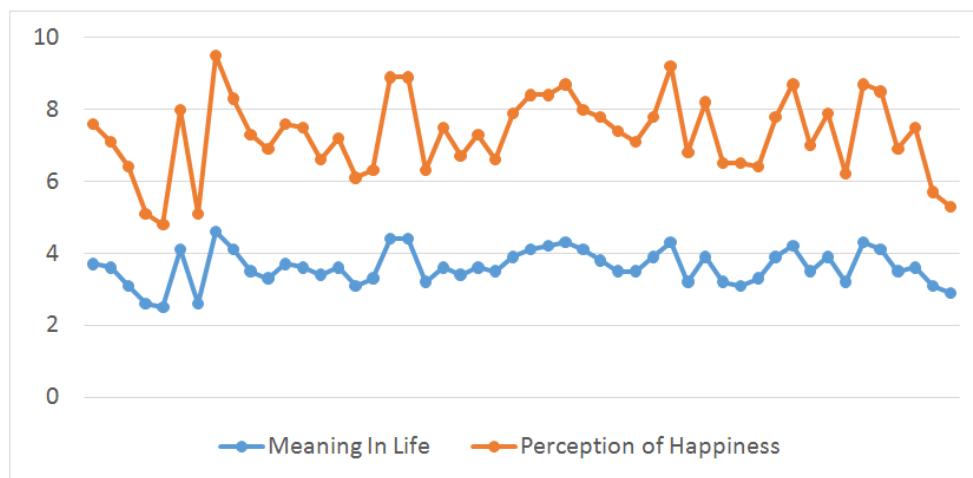
Once the results came in, these 50 employees were taught to improve meaning techniques & were taken through a workshop around enhancing meaning at workplace. After the workshop they were given a booklet wherein they were asked to complete one exercise every day for next 30 days. Once these people completed the 30 day course then the above two questionnaire was administered once again to see if the meaning and happiness have increased for this group.

## RESULTS

**Table 1(a): Showing Pearson's Correlation between Happiness and Meaning at Workplace**

Variables	Correlation
Happiness and Meaning	0.93**

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)



**Figure 1: Depicts the Relationship of Happiness and Meaning in Life**

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This table depicts that the correlation between happiness and meaningfulness came out to be 0.93 at 0.01

significance level.

The graph depicts that as the meaning in life of an employee increases, the happiness level also increases. Since the correlation is positive, meaning in life is directly proportional happiness level of a person.

**Table 1(b): Shows Difference in Level of Meaning in Life Pre/Post Intervention**

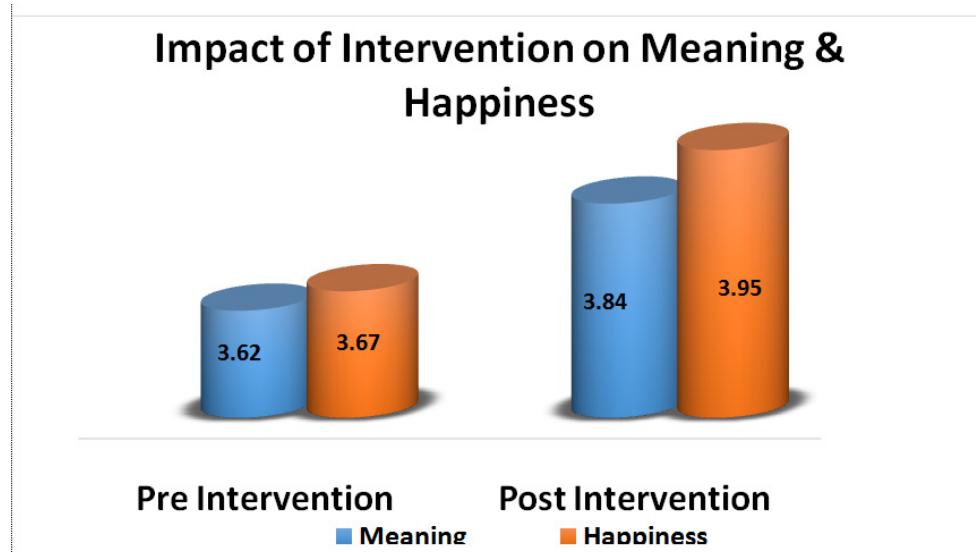
Meaning in Life	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference
Pre Intervention	50	3.62	.49	0.22
Post Intervention	50	3.84	.40	0.22

The mean difference came out to be 0.22 post intervention standard deviation of .49 and .40 during pre and post intervention.

**Table 1 (c): Shows Difference in Mean of Happiness of Sample Pre and Post Intervention**

Happiness	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference
Pre Intervention	50	3.67	.63	0.28
Post Intervention	50	3.95	.45	0.28

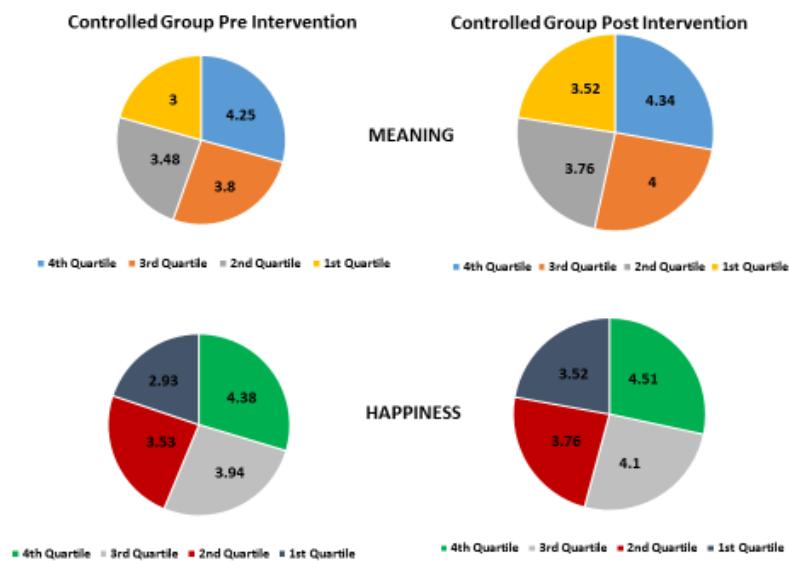
We also saw overall movement in meaning and happiness with the intervention:



**Figure 2**

While the meaning and happiness levels were at 3.62 and 3.66 respectively, there has been a jump on both of them because of meaning enhancement interventions. While the meaning in life increases to 3.84 from 3.62, the happiness level increases to 3.95 from 3.66.

When we dug deeper to find out where exactly have been the maximum improvement by distributing the entire scores in 4 quartiles, we realize that maximum improvement has come for the bottom two quartiles of happy people at the beginning of the experiment.

**Figure 3**

## DISCUSSIONS

The aim of the present study is to examine how meaning of life makes a difference in the happiness level of people at workplace. To fulfill the aim of the present study, three objective and three hypothesis were formulated.

A sample of 50 employees was selected among a life insurance and the employees were given two questionnaire to measure on both happiness and meaning in life and happiness level ( $n=50$ ). Once the measurement of happiness and meaning was done, we took the group through meaning enhancement exercises for 30 days and once they were through this intervention, we again measured the meaning in life as well as happiness level of the group. The questionnaire used for testing were MLQ (Meaningness in life) and SHS (Subjective happiness Scale).

There are three objectives of the study. The first one was to find out the relationship between meaning and happiness. The second objective was to understand if happiness can be increased by taking the group through meaning enhancement exercises. The third objective of the study was to find out if meaning enhances happiness then is it true for any segment or is there a case where it impacts the most if initial level of happiness is lower.

As per the first formulated hypothesis which states that a positive relationship will exist between meaning of life and happiness. To prove this hypothesis, Pearson's correlation was calculated to observe the kind of relationship meaning in life and happiness has. The correlation scores have been shown in table 1(a). Correlation value for meaning in life and happiness came out to be 0.93 at 0.01 level of significance. This means that as the level of meaning in life increase for a person, his happiness also increases with it. It's a strong correlation since the correlation value (0.93) is quite close to 1. The same has been depicted in Figure 1.

A negative work environment or an environment where people see a disconnect between their own values and organizational values causes major source of futility and meaninglessness (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006) and hence organizations should also take this into consideration while crafting their mission, purpose and values for the firm.

Question is if meaning and happiness are correlated then will this mean that we will be able to influence the

happiness of people by working on it. This brings us to the second hypothesis of the study. Here we predict that if the group is taken through meaning enhancing exercises it would impact the happiness level of the person. When we compared the happiness scores after the meaningful exercise we realized that while there has been an increase in happiness and meaning in life but these increases are not very significant. Overall the fact remains that we are able to see there is a movement on happiness if we were able to move the meaning in life through exercise but at an overall level the movement is not very high. This brings us to the third hypothesis, if this is true for the entire set or there are pockets of data where the movement has been significant.

To test this we broke down the data in four quartiles and looked for the variance in mean in both happiness and meaning in life. It was seen that people in the bottom two quartile of happiness and meaning saw the maximum jump in increase in happiness in the post intervention phase. It means that same interventions around increase of meaning has different impact on people depending on the initial level of happiness. Those at a lower level of meaning and happiness see their post intervention jump significantly (3.53) to (3.76).

## CONCLUSIONS

As per the results, it was found that meaning has an impact on happiness in life which was an extension of our detailed literature research. While the sample is small and also of one organization hence that is a limitation of the study. A much more detailed research would be required to see if this holds true for the larger sample too. The review of the literature suggests a change in the neural functioning of the brain on those going through meaning intervention. This is another area which can be delved deeper from a separate study.

Finally, with this paper we can confidently say that meaning in life is a must for people who look for happiness. While they seem two different entities, at the end of the day you can have best of the both world having happiness along with high level of meaning. This would mean that holistic happiness can be experienced if one pursues it. Also, meaning intervention would be one of the best ways in which managers can look at increasing happiness thus performance at workplace as happiness has a direct correlation with improved performance.

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